

# Civility and Humiliation under the French Flag: The Tensions of Colonial Liberalism in Pondicherry, 1871–86

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**Abstract** This article explores the extension of political “liberty” and franchise – as well as the eventual extension of citizenship rights – to Indians during the decades of France’s Third Republic (1870s–80s) in French colonial India. Not only does this example stand in stark contrast to the civil position of Indians in British India at the time, but it was also something of a unique situation in the French colonial world. How did the French attempt to apply a colonial policy of liberalism to Indian communities in Pondicherry, India, whose social world was constructed upon caste-based rituals and rules?

I argue that liberal policies that could violate caste rules concerning purity and lead to the loss of communal rights cannot be assessed without understanding how they were received and instrumentalized by the Indian population. Overall, the difficulty of transplanting liberalism in Pondicherry was not due just to the opposition of colonial society, but also due to the resistance of local Indians. Rejections of a more emancipatory agenda meant that the republican “civility” of liberty, equality and fraternity was compromised, and this illustrates one of the fundamental tensions in imperial/liberal discourse at the time.

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## Introduction

On 16 January 1873, a South Indian lawyer named Ponnoutamby walked into the local French court in the colonial city of Pondicherry wearing shoes and socks rather than the traditional slippers of his Vellaja caste. On observing this, the French magistrate seated at the judge’s bench cried: “Stop! What made you forget that you are an Indian? How dare you enter the court in the manner of a European?”

Ponnoutamby replied: “My Lord! Once inside the court, I am an advocate. At the bar, all are equal.”<sup>1</sup>

This brief exchange signals the tensions of a particular historical moment in French India when the contradictions of traditional colonial hierarchies and French colonial liberalism and its *mission civilisatrice* were in full force. Liberalism, classically defined as individual freedom and self-government, accommodated to

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colonialism through presumptive theories of human progress and the beneficial transfer of “superior” European political institutions to the colonies. As will be discussed, because of its heritage and status as one of the older French colonies, Pondicherry was deemed a suitable place for the application of liberal policy measures. Similarly, the *mission civilisatrice* was the rationale for French colonization in its quest to contribute to the spread of civilization among subjects, as well as mould them to be obedient to the imperial power. In this regard as well, Pondicherry’s inhabitants would become part of the movement to spread civilization to the perceived backward populations.

Note in the above anecdote that Ponnoutamby, the colonized Indian, asserted his right to dress his feet in European style in a European institutional setting. In doing so, he left behind the traditions of his Vellaja caste, one that encompassed liberal professions such as lawyers and merchants, to claim a very French fraternity and republican equality – a reflection of the limited success of France’s distinctive mission to civilize its colonial subjects. The magistrate revoked the presumption of equality and put Ponnoutamby in his place. Yet when this matter was eventually referred back to the high court in the French metropole, the ruling there upheld Ponnoutamby’s right to wear shoes in court.

This victory did not henceforth guarantee the Indian lawyer an untroubled existence. Precisely because of his attempts to fully assimilate within the French culture, Ponnoutamby remained a controversial figure not only in the local court, but also within the Tamil community of Pondicherry – “Tamil” referring to the predominant language and ethnic group of the southernmost state of India.

One way to analyze tensions embedded in this episode is through a more general analysis of the interaction of exclusionary practices of colonialism and countering inclusionary discourses, the latter including the universalizing discourse of bourgeois culture (Stoler and Cooper) and that of Western liberal political inclusion (Mehta).<sup>2</sup> The case of French-held Pondicherry in southern India during the era of Third Republic France in the 1870s and 1880s offers a particularly complex version of the inclusionary/exclusionary dynamic. The territory was the site of both inclusionary and exclusionary colonial and local discourses, and certain measures originating in the metropole that reflected inclusionary colonial policies towards locals were not always received with enthusiasm by the indigenous population – or, for that matter, by the local colonial administration. In this essay I analyze forms of exclusionary behaviour that were at the heart of the negotiations of the new inclusionary policies between the colonial state and local population in Pondicherry.

To do so, I not focus only on exclusionary and inclusionary dynamics as examples of political thought, but also investigate how such dynamics had the capacity for relational meaning in the ground-level reactions to these discourses, as expressed through the paired dynamics of civility and humiliation. Here civility is defined through a two-tier characterization: on one hand it is understood as “respecting the others”,<sup>3</sup> and on the other it refers to what the mid-twentieth century sociologist Norbert Elias termed the “civilizing process”, that is, new forms of civilized conduct propagated in overseas territories by European peoples through the colonial state. Elias notes, “We find in the relation of the West with other parts of the world the beginnings of the reduction in contrasts which is peculiar to every major wave of the civilizing movement.”<sup>4</sup>

Correspondingly, I employ a definition of humiliation put forward by Dennis Smith:

Humiliation entails the forced ejection and/or exclusion of individuals or groups from social roles and/or social categories with which they subjectively identify in a way that conveys the message that they are fundamentally inadequate to fill those roles or belong to those categories. Humiliation involves being violently pushed down and/or forcibly kept below the boundary line that separates the worthy from the unworthy.<sup>5</sup>

Conceptually this paper argues, as does Smith, that the civilized *habitus* must be understood in relation to the *habitus* of humiliation. More precisely, in the name of peaceful relations, particular subordinate groups of individuals may be forced to experience some degree of humiliation associated with an institutionalized social system or form of hierarchical organization, representing a form of symbolic violence.<sup>6</sup>

Colonial-era social institutions in late-nineteenth century Pondicherry evolved within two parallel cultures, each of which held its own notions of humiliation and civility. In our case, Tamil Hindus and French colonizers subscribing to a civility based on a hierarchical order of honour respected the order of unequal rank, whereas others who embraced the republican ideal of equality would understand respect and recognition to mean respect for equal dignity. Similarly, adherents of these two different perceptions of civility/respect each had a different definition of humiliation. For the former group, humiliation took place when the position of a “master” in a hierarchy was contested; for the latter, humiliation was when a person’s dignity was violated and the old paradigm of hierarchy reappeared. By enforcing certain laws and behaviours and failing to fully or effectively enforce others, these colonial institutions could promote either feelings of inadequacy and inferiority associated with humiliation, or respect for identities

and their differentiating attributes that promoted civility, an outcome relevant to the experience of both Indian locals and French colonizers.

I argue that during the era of the Third Republic in France, an overarching system of French imperialism sought to cultivate a more emancipatory social order throughout its colonial territory in South India, on top of the pre-existing uneasy coexistence of two systems of hierarchy – a colonial one based on a racial order, and a Hindu one founded on the caste system. The resulting outcome fostered communal uneasiness and tension by playing not only with various notions of civility, but also with different expressions of humiliation. The French colonial community based in Pondicherry went along with efforts to dismantle the Hindu-based hierarchy, which it generally perceived as humiliating for outcastes and low-caste members, yet it also sought to avoid toppling the colonial order; hence, local administrators often fell short of upholding Indians' new civil rights. Within the triangular relationship of the metropole, local colonial administrators and the Indian population, the dynamic between civility and humiliation was further complicated due to competing value-ridden understandings of what qualified as civility and humiliation, given the selective enforcement of both republican and Hindu principles by colonial administrators, officials and bureaucrats in France, and the Indian elites.

The four case studies that follow address individual and community-level expressions of broad inclusionary and exclusionary policies under the colonial regime. By examining the consequences of these policies on the ground, a more nuanced picture is revealed of the dynamics of colonial liberalism in a French setting that details the contradictions of a "benevolent" policy of extending civil liberties within a social world constructed by caste-based rules and rituals.

## Local Context

Nineteenth-century Pondicherry was a French colonial enclave located about 150 kilometres south of the British colonial city of Madras (the latter known today as Chennai). France first staked a claim to the territory in 1673. During the eighteenth century Pondicherry's economic growth, combined with French efforts to colonize more territory, threatened France's rival, the British East India Company. This led to many years of hostility between the two over who would dominate the Indian subcontinent. After much contention, the 1815 Treaty of Paris finally resolved the dispute, with

Great Britain taking the lion's share and France left with just five geographically dispersed *comptoirs* (trading posts) in India where they held sovereign rights.<sup>7</sup>

Compared to the restive colonies held by the French in Vietnam, the Indian *comptoirs* were perceived by officials in Paris as more calm and "mature" territories, free of any broad-based opposition to colonial power.<sup>8</sup> Hence as a community, the Indians of the French establishments were deemed sufficiently self-restrained to be able to benefit from policies rooted in colonial liberalism.<sup>9</sup> Not only were republican political institutions transplanted to the French establishments in India, but Indian males were also granted the right to participate in self-government.

This contrasts greatly with the situation in Vietnam, which at the time was not under any form of republican rule. The Vietnamese were subjects, not citizens, and thus remained under the authority of local rules rather than French law. They did not have basic rights, such as the right to vote. A strain of "French colonial reformism" did materialize in Vietnam between 1905 and 1928 which sought to supplant permanent colonial domination with a less pervasive form of long-term French supervision over its "backwards" colonies. Before the end of the nineteenth century Cochinchina manoeuvred to acquire a Colonial Council, but this body was under the control of the colonizers and had little authority. Under the territory's governor-general Albert Sarraut (1911–1914; 1917–1919) several chambers of representatives were established at the provincial level in Tonkin and Annam. Still, such institutions were only consultative and participation was restricted.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the French Empire, political rights had generally been denied to colonized peoples on the grounds of cultural difference. By contrast, colonial subjects in Pondicherry were not required to embrace cultural inclusion as a condition for political participation in the French polity. In fact, all of French India was an exception to this rule, since Indians from all faiths were granted political rights; thus, they were allowed to combine customs and rights.<sup>11</sup> What led French authorities to permit this exception?

The political rule granting the right to vote was targeted specifically at the newly emancipated slaves from France's long-established colonies of Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean and those in the Caribbean. The measure was also extended to the other longstanding French establishments in India, so Pondicherry's population benefited from it as well.<sup>12</sup> In 1872, decentralized political laws in French India permitted the creation of local councils [*conseils locaux*] for each trading post and one legislative body, the colonial council [*conseil colonial*] based in Pondicherry, which

would oversee the French establishments in India. By 1879, the latter was replaced by a general council [*conseil général*] elected by universal suffrage.<sup>13</sup> Such a representative political structure was completed with the transplantation of the French administrative division, the *commune*, to the French Indian establishments in 1880. The councils of the ten new *communes* (*conseils municipaux*) – four of which were located in Pondicherry – were also elected by universal suffrage.<sup>14</sup>

However, French influence in the colonial city was preserved by requiring the members of the local and general councils to be elected by a voting body that was 50 per cent European and 50 per cent local.<sup>15</sup> While such laws allowed Indian subjects to participate more fully in the life of the political community at the local and national levels, the distinctive shared culture grounded largely on the caste system – from the colonizers' point of view – required control through electoral means. Colonial administrators and certain French politicians perceived Indians as “insufficiently French”, and the resulting situation meant that universal suffrage served to create “subjects with electoral votes” rather than French citizens.<sup>16</sup>

The structure of colonial governance in French India rested on a minimal administration to run the French Indian establishments. This in turn translated into a small group of individuals – the colonial and local elites – who traded off positions as councilmen, either in the local council of Pondicherry or in the general council of India. Indians could not be members of both councils concurrently. Council sessions were thus meetings of personalities rather than assemblies of administrators performing their bureaucratic role (see appendix for details).

Moreover, as each caste was allowed to have its own “family and domestic tribunal” to deal with “caste affairs, there were also independent bodies from the colonial state”. Yet the French governor still maintained the right to control caste-based decisions to see that they conformed to *mamool* (tradition). Indeed, such decisions had to be sanctioned by a judge of the peace.<sup>17</sup> Muslims were ruled by Islamic law, whereas Christians as well as Hindus were governed by Hindu law, as many Christians continued to follow local customs and norms. Still, any request by Pondicherry inhabitants to have public processions, make music, or carry out public celebrations for marriages and burials or other ceremonies were subject to the authority of the governor, since these were primarily issues of public order. The French policy of non-interference in local customs did not, however, extend to criminal law.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, the structures and provisions put into place by the French colonial administration in Pondicherry created the condi-

tions under which various groups there struggled to reconcile competing understandings of what was acceptable or equitable. The outcome of such struggles altered the form of liberal ideas on the ground. The following sections address the negotiations of these new inclusionary policies between the colonial state and the local populations in Pondicherry through four cases regarding everyday life in the French colonial enclave.

## I. Case Studies

### Case One: Social Exclusion, Boundary Transgression and Pragmatic Civility

A gap existed in colonial Pondicherry between the legal attempt to democratize social relations through such measures as giving indigenous males the right to vote, and the everyday practices of the local population. The case to be discussed in this regard concerns a local Indian who was both a teacher and a “renouncer”. The law of 1881 allowed natives to receive French citizenship through a voluntary process called renunciation. They had to give up their legal status as Hindus or Muslims to submit themselves to the French civil code and were subsequently known as *renonçants* (in English, renouncers). Such a law displayed a clear relationship between civility and citizenship, as by abiding by the French civil code, local people could adopt French forms of civility and receive full citizenship in exchange – an approach that was central to the inclusionary practices of the republic.<sup>19</sup>

In the eyes of the locals, however, anyone who renounced their caste status was either an outcaste or a member of the lower castes.<sup>20</sup> This status discrepancy fuelled the desire among caste holders for spatial segregation, as any renouncer posed the threat of pollution. Returning to the example above, special allowances were included as part of the colonial education budget that allotted money to teachers to compensate them for the effects of what was classified as “caste prejudice”. One particular teacher who chose to become a renouncer found that because he had given up his caste-based status, he was unable to rent a house in the Villenour district of Pondicherry, as the caste Hindus who lived there did not want to have him in their neighbourhood. Instead, an indemnity was given to him in order to build a house elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> By abandoning his legal status as Hindu, this schoolteacher effectively lost his community rights.

In this case, humiliation was embedded in what was perceived as emancipatory and civilized action – fighting against the caste system – on the part of the French state. For the Europeans, caste



was perceived as a key marker of Indian society, one generally incompatible with a modern definition of society.<sup>22</sup> Republicans understood the rejection of the Hindu religion as meaning the rejection of religious inequality among Indians, which they assumed would lead to the latter's subsequent embrace of the civil ideals of the republican order in the form of social equality.

On the ground, by contrast, expulsion of the renouncer from the "caste space" was a form of "pragmatic civility", that is, respect for the different other, since it was a means to avoid conflict among parties and resolve the situation in a way that allowed society to function peacefully. Thus, efforts to implement the ideals of the civility of the republican order in the form of liberty, equality and fraternity had the effect of disturbing the normative sphere of Indian Hinduism. Accordingly, the renouncer teacher had to be geographically separated from his fellow Indians, who adhered to Hindu beliefs. This ex-caste teacher faced harsh stigmatization and penalties for daring to break away from the distinguishing local code of behaviour. What was perceived as a mark of distinction and superiority (republican civility) from the colonial point of view was for locals a sign of debasement. However, in this case the republican ideal was violated, since it was not recognized by the Hindu population. Republican civility was thus damaged as a result, but the trade-off allowed the system of Hinduism to remain inviolate as long as spatial segregation could be maintained.

### Case Two: Institutional Practices of Humiliation and Civility

Colonialists frequently interpreted certain aspects of the local culture – such as the everyday observance of food taboos linked to the caste system – as degrading to the local community. However, locals themselves had a different understanding altogether of what qualified as degrading; and as the following example demonstrates, caste-based humiliation could be experienced as far more degrading than the humiliation of physical imprisonment.

In 1872, members of the general and local councils of Pondicherry discussed the possibility of allowing a certain category of prisoners – those who had committed minor crimes such as non-payment of debt – to have their food brought in from the outside. The governor at first opposed such a move, which he claimed would be too difficult a challenge for the prison authorities to oversee. As he stated: "It would disorganize the service and compromise the security of the establishment" by transforming "the jail into a hostel". One of the Tamil members of the council, Covindassamynaik, emphasized how such a measure would benefit



high-caste prisoners, adding, for example, how a “master” might unfairly end up being incarcerated simply due to the negligence of his maids who had thrown rubbish onto the street. Consequently, if such an individual had to be subject to the regulations of the prison, Covindassamynaïk said, “he will lose his caste, his honour, because we need to take into account the habits, customs, and prejudices of the Hindu population”. Another council member responded to Covindassamynaïk that the principle of “equality before the law”, as part of colonial liberalism, had to be maintained within the penitentiary system, as the prison diet imposed on convicts was part of the punishment for transgressing the law.<sup>23</sup>

The caste system endorsed a hierarchical social order based on the notion of purity and the rights and duties of each Hindu. Thus, the higher a caste’s position on the scale of purity, the closer to a state of purity its members’ way of life was expected to be. For instance, Brahmins were expected to be vegetarian since food could not be polluted by bloodshed, which was thought to be impure. In addition, they could not share their food with people of lower castes, and they also had to wash their own dishes in order to avoid contact between impure hands and their food.<sup>24</sup> Such a food taboo was in fact a cultural construct reinforcing distinction and exclusion in this social milieu.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, if someone were to lose their caste-determined identity this would disturb the dharma, the law that ordered the universe and assigned a specific place and function to this person. Hence, as the *procureur général* Aubenais stressed a year later, the implementation of a uniform diet within the penitentiary system led individuals to choose “exile” [*exil*] rather than incarceration, even if the sentence was for only a few days, since for an individual to lose caste status would entail a kind of social death.<sup>26</sup> Records indicate that some high-caste individuals who were charged with a crime fled to neighbouring British-held Madras for a period of time before returning to Pondicherry.

The governor concluded the matter by deciding to allow “special measures” for those who were charged only with offenses of *simple police*, which were less severe and generally punishable by fines imposed by the police [*contravention de simple police*]. At the local level, the majority of the French and Indian members of the council supported Covindassamynaïk’s request.<sup>27</sup> By 1879 this procedure became a law stipulating that the category of prisoners who had committed minor crimes or who were to be incarcerated no longer than a year could have their food brought in from the outside at their own expense.<sup>28</sup> An alternative was to choose someone from a “good caste” to prepare food for the prisoners, such as in the case of the “agricultural colony”, a prison for juvenile offenders created

in the city's colonial park.<sup>29</sup> As Brahmins were already pure, the food they prepared could be offered to any prisoner without violating caste conventions.

A similar case involved another kind of public institution brought by the French. Discussing the creation of a hospice in 1873, some officials complained that the constraints of the caste system could pose a threat to this institution's success. Mr Guerre, a member of the local council, described caste as a "permanent obstacle to progress and civilization". For the *procureur général* Aubenais it embodied a "hierarchy of contempt", while Guerre added that Pondicherry would have to build a "hospice subdivided . . . into as many little hospices as there are castes, each having its own distinct resources as well as its own staff". M. Ponnou-Rassindri contested the idea that castes would be an obstacle to the proper running of such an institution, since hunger would overrule tradition. However, Covindassamynaïk reminded him that no Hindu would want "to lose his caste, renounce his ancient traditions".<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in a society structured by the caste system, religion defined the social order; and defying the traditional authority based on the sanctity of time-honoured norms seemed impossible. According to Covindassamynaïk, removing the dictates of the caste system in the institutions under discussion would cause humiliation among the locals through the loss of their social identity and subsequently their community rights.

Adaptation to local norms was again advocated by having two cooks from different castes as well as two water wells, one for the higher castes and the other for the "inferior" ones. Segregation among Indian people and food taboos had to be implemented. Following the advice of the high-caste leader and anti-republican Chanemougam, the council expressed a wish to further study the question during an extraordinary session.<sup>31</sup> Finally, in 1876, a decree declared the creation of a hospice for the "poor elderly of both sexes, of all religions, but only for those from the *Choutres* or *Soudras* caste [*Choutres* were Indians who originally belonged to castes but converted to Catholicism] and of other superior castes, or Muslims".<sup>32</sup> While Islam does not recognize caste distinctions, Muslims in French India were in fact divided into caste-like categories.<sup>33</sup>

The examples of the prison and hospice show that local caste groups perceived each as a potentially humiliating experience where they could experience religious discrimination. The prison rested on a discourse of order – the issue of maintaining security for all within the jail system – while both the prison and the hospice were predicated on a universal discourse of rights and emancipation that specified equality before the law, so that all inmates as

well as elderly and sick people would receive similar treatment as other members of the same category. The fact that equality was “tampered with” in both institutional settings demonstrates the fundamental tension between individual rights and communal rights, fuelled by the project of improving colonial societies according to the liberal model of imperialism.

### Case Three: Humiliation as a Parody of Civility

“Gallicizing” local society was a challenge, as shown by the August 1886 marriage ceremony of two ex-outcastes who had become renouncers in the Pondicherry *commune* of Bahour. The mayor of the community, named Vengattarayin, was a member of the Retty (landowners) caste, and he assigned the duty of marrying this couple to a member of the municipal council who was from a lower caste so that he himself could remain unpolluted through contact with the impure. (Any procedure carried out in a way that did not respect the religious hierarchy was seen as an “illegitimate humiliation” for the traditional Hindu believer.) After the ceremony the mayor sent for a Brahmin to purify the room before he himself re-entered City Hall.<sup>34</sup> At the same time that the mayor behaved in a way that complied with the caste system, the lower-caste member of the municipal council proceeded to – inadvertently or intentionally – mock the ideal of republican civility by making a parody of it. As the pro-republican newspaper *Le Progrès* reported:

Long afterwards he condemns the outcastes by taking his time; and with mockery, the poor children are legally married by the city councilman, reading in a plodding fashion [*clopin-clopant*] the Tamil translation of the articles of the civil code, which he hardly understands, and mumbling the sacramental formula: *in the name of the law* – which does not exist for my fellows and myself and which I despise – *I marry you* – naughty outcastes who believed that you could escape your condition of slavery by adopting the French law that we manipulate as we like.

So this is how young people are legally married by a fellow hostile to the principle of the marriage approved by the civil law. And the gay cortege goes humming; he [is humming] the praises of the republic that has given to the outcastes, at least in principle, an equal rank with caste Hindus, although this one defends inch by inch his unique privileges.<sup>35</sup>

Looking back over the entire incident, the newspaper argued that Mayor Vengattarayin could not belong to two social systems at the same time, on the one hand obeying *mamool* (tradition) and on the other representing the republic through his function of mayor. Moreover, “he has neither in fact nor in law, [the knowledge of the] French law required in order for a state official to marry citizens”, hence he was unqualified to be part of this Western political

institution. Here we see the juxtaposition of liberalism as a tool of emancipation for some outcastes, while for other caste-affiliated locals it was a threat to their social identity, prestige and caste rights. While Vengattarayin's status as mayor reinforced his power over the village of Bahour, according to *Le Progrès*, after the purification of City Hall he was "lounging on a chair" and making "jokes about the renouncers [in City Hall] just as if he were at home". Merely transplanting the practices of a Western institution would not necessarily promote the spread of civilization if Indian locals refused to embrace the political ideas and behaviour that were part of such republican institutions. Through its critique of the ceremony, was the newspaper perhaps implying that liberals needed to evolve from the acceptance of the universalist project of civilization to the belief in insuperable differences among people divided by race and caste?<sup>36</sup>

#### Case Four: Contentions over Appropriate Attire

The republican project of assimilation acted to destabilize the existing demarcation between the two separate systems of Indian Hinduism and French colonialism. The small number of Indians who had managed to obtain a French education demanded to be acknowledged as an assimilated group. Returning to the opening anecdote of this article, we may observe that the lawyer Ponnoutamby, upon behaving as a French person, was scolded by the French magistrate. Taking ethnicity as a marker of Frenchness, the European magistrate told him that he was an Indian and therefore could not dress in a Western manner: "Come in barefoot . . . Adhere to the local tradition [of not wearing Western shoes]."<sup>37</sup>

Becoming "French" was thus a contentious and ambiguous affair. While this magistrate implied that an Indian could not lose his cultural identity, the Westernization in dress meant that in fact there were no external symbols that could differentiate Indian locals from European colonizers. Our protagonist appealed to the Supreme Court of Justice in France that his individual rights were being violated, and the case was eventually decided in his favour. Although French authorities in the metropole respected local customs in the colonies, they did not oblige people to conform to them. This victory made Ponnoutamby's case public, and the support of the Supreme Court of Justice in France allowed a minority of Indians to follow in his footsteps by behaving according to French forms of civility.

Ponnoutamby was himself a Christian lawyer who fought against the caste system in order to replace Hindu laws with French civil

law. He sought not only the political assimilation of Indians, but their full cultural assimilation as well. In his view, France had an obligation to encourage locals to renounce their personal status. As the leader of this small, liberal and Francophile group, he asserted: "I have burnt my caste. I don't have one. I am French. This is my caste and my title."<sup>38</sup>

The issue of appropriate attire arose again when the British governor of Madras visited Pondicherry in 1885. French and Indian local authorities met twice in advance of the visit to discuss whether the Hindu elites should wear Western shoes to the reception given by the governor, as was the appropriate custom in official function rooms. The majority, supporting local custom, rejected the idea. The community republican newspaper *Le Progrès* argued that the slippers (*babouches*) worn by the Tamil elites had been introduced by the earlier Muslim occupiers, and thus Western shoes could be adopted by locals as long as the latter were under European control. As the article concluded, "Like king, like people."<sup>39</sup> The article's author observed that the "spread of civilization" in the narrow sense was "the spread of our institutions and standards of conduct beyond the West", as clothing reflected the social system to which one belonged.<sup>40</sup> Hence markers of difference between the colonizers and the locals had to be erased, as both were members of the same republican nation. We might also speculate that the Indian elites' position could have been an anti-colonial mode of expressing a civil identity outside the moral *habitus* of the colonizers.

In both cases we see the issue of two overlapping systems in actual practice, and the tensions resulting from such a situation. In the end, the reality of a weak French colonial state and the vested interests of the Hindu elite led to a façade of civility in both senses of the term in Pondicherry. Civility itself became damaged due to the interactions of these two systems, which created new kinds of scenarios associated with humiliation. Indeed, rights were denied to those Indians who demanded assimilation into the dominant culture in the name of maintaining local harmony, and in response to the coinciding interests of the Hindu elite and most members of colonial society. The local court's decision on Ponnoutamby's case was humiliating for him and his supporters in its denial of their wish to belong to the French republican family, yet by performing acts that defied social convention, such as sitting with outcastes at church or winning the support of a French court in the metropole, Ponnoutamby was able to open some space for liberal and Francophile Indians. This change, however, served to reinforce tensions within society at large.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has explored some paradoxes of the French imperial policy of colonial liberalism, with three main aims. Focusing on the French colony of Pondicherry in the early days of the Third Republic, its first concern is to illuminate how the unease between two hierarchical systems was manifested in its members' distinctive perceptions and experience of humiliation and civility. This distinctiveness could be seen in the everyday interactions between various groups and institutions that ultimately served to compromise the grand republican project in southern India.

The second aim of this article is to study the imperial experience of colonialism on the ground, as it was received by the Indian population. While writers such as Uday Singh Mehta and Jennifer Pitts have analyzed the relation between inclusive political thought and empire more broadly, I present concrete cases that demonstrate that the project to extend civil liberties under French rule cannot be comprehended without considering the parallel social impact of such "freedoms" on those affected – not only through the experience of humiliation, but also in the loss of communal rights.<sup>42</sup> All of this was a high price to pay for embracing republican civility. Correspondingly, other Indians were denied their individual rights by the colonial state, despite the fact that they had not only embraced the republican ethos, but had also rejected their religion in order to adhere to the French civil code.

Finally, this study offers yet another illustration of the heterogeneity of colonial European society. Based on the cases presented here, it is possible to conclude that Pondicherry Tamil society, too, was riddled with conflicts and competing interests in locals' everyday dealings with the colonizers. The tensions of empire, as delineated by Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler in their classic work, were in this case played out also within local Indian society, as particular sectors of the Indian population embraced dissimilar conceptions of the colonial vision. These ranged from cultural absorption of French republican ideals, on the one hand, to a tolerance of French presence and culture without any significant degree of cultural and religious renunciation, on the other.

The effects of this earlier complex social equation continue to reverberate. Although France renounced its claim over Pondicherry in 1962, its political project to assimilate the locals lasted well beyond this date. Article 5 of the Treaty of Cession gave locals the option to choose between French and Indian nationality during the six-month period between August 1962 and February 1963. While only two percent of the population opted for French nationality at the time, due to the fear of being expelled from India, this measure



created an unusual category of French citizens residing on the Indian subcontinent, a legacy of French colonialism and its civilizing mission.

In the French postcolonial world, Pondicherry still bears the unique distinction of having an ethnic Indian minority with French citizenship. On visiting the city today, one can observe a number of Indian locals manifesting their French identity by using the French language, patronizing French products, and wearing Western dress; meanwhile, other locals retain French citizenship yet live in a way that is culturally Tamil. And thus we may ask, is such a situation overall reminiscent of civility, with the pragmatic acceptance of European culture and the hybrid identities that it has fostered? Yet today's locals also voice complaints about the cost of living going up because the wealthy, retired French Indians of Pondicherry – who have access to the European labour market and who enjoy benefits of the welfare state – have no need to bargain over the cost of local goods. So is this, too, a legacy of the exclusive hierarchies of the French colonial past that continue to engender some degree of humiliation for a portion of the resident population?

Just as the taken-for-granted attractiveness of secularism was challenged by Hinduism in colonial Pondicherry, contemporary France has been facing a similar challenge from Islam over the past two decades. Rather than a unitarian, universal and egalitarian republican motto, some Frenchmen are asking for a more heterogeneous vision of French history and culture. Generalizing from the examples discussed here, we can observe continuity between those in France today who embrace a unitary republican model of citizenship, and those calling for one based on communities being able to voice their cultural identity in the public sphere. Yet reconciling universal rights and membership within the French nation-state with the challenge of ethnic and religious diversity is not new, as the case of colonial Pondicherry shows, and such a situation should make us wonder if any lesson has been learnt from the colonial experience in this regard.

## Notes

I would like to thank Kay Mohlman and an anonymous reviewer for their extensive and useful comments.

<sup>1</sup> P. Raja, *A Concise History of Pondicherry*. Pondicherry: Busy Bee Books, 2003, pp. 73–74.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda", in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, pp. 59–86; Uday S. Mehta, "Liberal Strategies of Exclusion", in *Tensions of Empire*, ed. Cooper and Stoler, pp. 1–56.



<sup>3</sup> Cheshire Calhoun, "The Virtue of Civility", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29, 3 (2000): 255.

<sup>4</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 386.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Smith, "Organizations and Humiliation: Looking beyond Elias", *Organization* 8, 3 (2001): 542.

<sup>6</sup> See Smith, "Organizations and Humiliation".

<sup>7</sup> Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion*. London: Macmillan Press, 1996, p. 23; William F.S. Miles, *Imperial Burdens: Countercolonialism in Former French India*. Boulder, Colo.: L. Rienner Publishers, 1995, p. 5; Jacques Weber, *Les Etablissements français en Inde au XIXe siècle (1816–1914)*. Paris: Librairie de l'Inde, 1988, 5 vol., p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Michalon, *Des Indes françaises aux Indiens français ou comment peut-on être Franco-Pondichérien?* Mémoire de D.E.A. de sociologie, 1990, Université Aix-Marseille, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, "Organizations and Humiliation", p. 538.

<sup>10</sup> William J. Duiker, *Vietnam: Revolution in Transition* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 32–33; Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochine: La colonisation ambiguë 1858–1954* (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 2001), pp. 292–95; Joseph Buttinger, *Viet-Nam: a dragon embattled* (London: Pall Mall P.), 1967, pp. 87–100.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890–1914*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Oruno D. Lara, *Suffrage universel et colonisation, 1848–1852*. Paris: Harmattan, 2007, pp. 19–23.

<sup>13</sup> M. Clairon, *La renunciation au Statut Personnel dans l'Inde Française*. Paris: Société Anonyme du Recueil Sirey, 1926, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Weber, "Les Etablissements français en Inde au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle (1816–1914)", *Le Trait-D' Union*, August 1987, p. 7. See H. de Closets d'Errey, *Précis chronologique de l'histoire de l'Inde Française (1664–1816) suivi d'un relevé des faits marquants de l'Inde française au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Pondichéry: Imprimerie du gouvernement, 1934.

<sup>15</sup> C. Poulain, *Notes sur l'Inde française, n. 2: le régime politique*. Chalon-sur-Saône: Imprimerie de L. Marceau, 1894, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Michalon, *Des Indes françaises aux Indiens français*, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> A. Esquer, *Essais sur les castes en Inde*. Pondicherry: A. Saligny, 1870, pp. 340–41.

<sup>18</sup> *Bulletin Officiel des établissements français de l'Inde*, 1871, pp. 271–72, Record Centre of Pondicherry, Jeewanandapuram, Lawspet, Pondicherry, India (hereafter RCP).

<sup>19</sup> Very few people, even among Catholic Indians, became renouncers: about 3,700 persons in 1883, that is, 1.3 per cent of the population of French India. The overwhelming majority of renouncers were Catholic. There were far fewer Hindu renouncers and even fewer Muslim renouncers, since the latter did not want to give up marriage and inheritance practices proscribed by the Koran. Michalon, *Des Indes françaises aux Indiens français*, p. 45, fn123.

<sup>20</sup> Michalon, *Des Indes françaises aux Indiens français*, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> Conseil général de l'Inde française, 1895, pp. 156–61, RCP.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas B. Dirks, "Castes of Mind", *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992): 56–57.

<sup>23</sup> Conseil Local de Pondichéry, 1872, p. 141, RCP.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Sergent, "Les castes, mode d'emploi", *L'histoire* 278 (July–August 2003): 14.

<sup>25</sup> The epic literature gives examples of individuals who ate not only meat but beef, and who are considered gods today. Brahmins are traditionally vegetarian, yet some Brahmin groups such as the Kashmiri, Bengali and Saraswat are non-vegetarian. Vegetarianism was added as a component to the prestige and distinction of castes as compared to outcastes relatively late in the evolution of Hinduism. M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Conseil Local de Pondichéry, 1873, p. 208, RCP.

<sup>27</sup> Conseil général de l'Inde française, 1872, pp. 307–10, RCP; Conseil local de Pondichéry, 1872, pp. 141–42, RCP; Conseil local de Pondichéry, 1873, p. 208, RCP.

<sup>28</sup> *Bulletin officiel des établissements français de l'Inde*, 1879, pp. 361–62, RCP.

<sup>29</sup> *Bulletin officiel des établissements français de l'Inde*, 1879, p. 13, RCP.

<sup>30</sup> Conseil local de Pondichéry, 1873, pp. 206–13, RCP.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> *Le Moniteur officiel des établissements français dans l'Inde* 1417 (8 September 1876).

<sup>33</sup> For example, their "castes" were, "in ascending order of dignity, Pathans, Mughals and Sheikhs, emulating the 'noble' and the 'pure', that is, Arabs in direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad". Jackie Assayag, *The Making of Democratic Inequality: Caste, Class, Lobbies and Politics in Contemporary India (1880–1995)*. Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondichéry, 1995, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> "Pondichéry, le 1er août 1886", *Le Progrès* 196 (1 August 1886): 902.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> On British liberal imperialism, see Karuna Mantena, "The Crisis of Liberal Imperialism", *Politique, culture, société* 11 (May–August 2010): 1–25.

<sup>37</sup> Raja, *A Concise History of Pondicherry*, pp. 73–74.

<sup>38</sup> Weber, *Pondichéry et les comptoirs de l'Inde après Dupleix*, pp. 227–29.

<sup>39</sup> "Une délibération sur les babouches", *Le Progrès* 120 (8 February 1885): 524–25.

<sup>40</sup> Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, pp. 383–84.

<sup>41</sup> Weber, *Pondichéry et les comptoirs de l'Inde après Dupleix*, pp. 229.

<sup>42</sup> Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

## Appendix

To provide a brief snapshot of what colonization looked like in Pondicherry from the 1870s to World War I, a rough presentation of the colonial state and its main institutions is given in the table below.

<b>Colonial State</b>	
Governor-General of the French Establishments of India	
<b>For the French Establishments of India (for the five outposts)</b>	<b>For the District of Pondicherry</b>
<i>General Council of India</i>	<i>Local Council of Pondicherry</i>
<i>Direction de l'Interieur</i> , created in 1880: Provided job opportunities to local youth	
<i>Chief of Education</i>  <i>Colonial Council of Public Education</i> , created in 1893: Watched over the implementation of programmes and methods of education	
	<i>Committees of Indian Notables</i> , created in 1872: In charge of the direct surveillance of schools for girls of caste origin (in Pondicherry, Nellitope, Oulgaret and Ariancoupam)
<i>Commission of Finances</i>	
<i>Committee of Indian Jurisprudence</i> , created in 1826: Explicated local laws for the colonial administrators and French magistrate	
<i>Colonial Court</i>	